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Getting The Attention Of the Press

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What's new(s) on Capitol Hill?

Anything with a gimmick.

Maryland's Sen. Charles Mathias recently introduced a resolution to make John Philip Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever" the country's official march. Mathias could have just dropped the piece of paper in the hopper, and that would have been the beginning and perhaps the end of it.

From Mathias' staff, however, came the notion of inviting the U.S. Marine Corps Band to join the act, and the Band agreed.

So, on the appointed day, there was the Band lined up on the Senate steps blaring Sousa songs across the plaza, with Mathias down front, near the piccolos.

There, too, were the networks, all four Washington TV stations, and assorted other correspondents and

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cameramen, some never seen before, capturing on film and tape the Mathias words and the Sousa music, for the city, the country, maybe the entire free world.

Little matter and little known that it wasn't even new news. Mathias' staff discovered deep into the planning for the event that a congressman—Delbert Latta, of Ohio—had proposed the same thing in the House earlier in the session. But without the Marine Band. Without all those cameras. Eat your heart out, Mr. Latta.

Little matter, too, that two days earlier, Mathias, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, was up to something really important. He was chairing a subcommittee hearing on how to make a national energy plan work effectively and fairly.

Unfortunately, the subject matter was full of words like administration, procedures, management, due process. Deadly stuff. Not a camera in sight. Not a word in the papers.

The incidents are not isolated. Mathias was scheduled one day to inspect a broken-down bridge in Montgomery County that was of mild interest because commuters were com-

plaining and there was a question of who would pay to fix the span. Mathias was ill the day of the scheduled visit, and didn't go. Three TV crews did, however, and the bridge story was on the air that night. And in the papers.

Two weeks later, when Mathias rescheduled his bridge trip, three TV crews were out again, with a reporter-photographer team from The Washington Post, and others. The busted bridge was worth a total of 114 column inches in The Post, plus precious minutes on nearly every tube in town.

About the same time, Mathias, a member of the Senate committee that is investigating the nation's intelligence activities, announced he was introducing a bill to protect private citizens against bugging, wiretapping, opening of mail, entering of dwellings, inspecting of personal records, and so forth, by government agents.

Not a word.

It happens to everyone. Sen. McGovern called a news conference one morning to announce that he, Mathias, and two congressmen—Bingham of New York and Whalen of Ohio—were submitting legislation to help communities dependent on defense industries shift to peacetime without economic stress.

One reporter showed up, from the Dayton Journal Herald, to hear from the man who might have been elected President three years ago.

On another day, when someone brought some trained lobsters to the Hill to demonstrate something or other, the lobsters were all over the TV news that night. The memory of the lobsters lingers, but not the cause for which they performed.

"Media events" are not new and often are not news, either. Still, everyone needs them. Senators and Congressmen need them to get themselves in front of the pack. When you are one of 535 and your pet bill is one of thousands and you are not running for President, how do you get anyone to pay attention?

The media, principally television, need them, too. "Talking heads" can go only so far on the 6 o'clock news, and if you've seen one committee hearing, you've seen them all—the members around the curved bench, the witnesses at the table, the tourists in the back of the room.

It may be different when Congress lets cameras on the floor for live coverage. Then again, that might bore a viewer to tears, or to the soaps.

Meanwhile, for TV particularly, confined by congressional rules to certain prescribed locations on the Capitol grounds for outside filming, letting a correspondent and crew loose to do something different is like springing school kids for recess. When the Marine Band lined up on the Senate steps, cameras poked everywhere except down the throats of the tubas.

Anything visual will do, and hang the subject matter. Now, what can we do about this economy thing . . . you know, this inflation, recession, unemployment. Hey, here's an idea . . .